



Living Christmas Trees

After serving as a Christmas tree, a live evergreen can be planted outside to landscape your yard. All it takes is a little planning. The first thing you need to do—in the fall, before the ground freezes—is dig a hole in which to plant the tree after Christmas.

Choose and Prepare a Planting Site

Choose a planting site that will accommodate the tree's height and width as it grows. Although the tree may be small when you purchase it, it can become quite large, making it a poor choice to plant under overhead utility lines or near buildings. In addition, few evergreens are native to Missouri, so you need to choose a species that can adapt to Missouri's climate and soils. Your local state or extension forester can offer suggestions for species that would meet your needs.

Before the ground freezes, dig a hole, shoveling the soil onto a wheelbarrow to save for backfill when you plant the tree. Make sure the hole is larger than you need, because the ground may freeze and expand. Cover the hole with straw or mulch, and store your soil in a warm place to keep them both frost-free.

Purchase Your Tree

Buy your tree a week or two before you want to bring it inside. Before making the purchase, ask yourself a few questions: Will the tree fit through the doorways of my home? Will it fit in the room I want it in? How heavy and large is the burlaped ball or container the tree is growing in? And, more importantly, How heavy will it be when it's time to carry it out after it has been watered for many days?

To help your tree make the transition from the frigid cold of the nursery to the heat of your home, keep it in a staging area, such as an unheated garage or shed that stays above freezing. Store and water it here for a week or two. Keep the container or root ball moist and do not allow it to freeze. During this time, check the tree's foliage for insects and other critters, and remove any you find.

Bring Your Tree Inside

Inside the house, choose a spot for your tree that is away from heat sources (such as furnace vents, space heaters, a fireplace or wood stove). Make sure there is adequate space and—since your tree is a living plant—plenty of light. Find a large, leak-proof pot or other container that will easily accommodate the root ball of your tree. Place several rocks or a block of wood in the bottom of the pot to ensure your tree's roots don't sit in a pool of water. Stand the tree in the pot and cover the root ball with mulch or newspaper to prop the tree upright and keep its roots from drying out. Periodically water your tree, making sure to keep the root ball moist, but not wet.

Plan to keep your tree in the house for a short time, ideally not more than 7 to 10 days. The longer it is in the house, the greater the chance the tree will start to grow buds, which will not survive when you plant the tree out in the cold. If the tree buds out, its chance of surviving decreases.

Plant Your Tree

After Christmas, move the tree back to the staging area. Keep it watered and above freezing for a few days to gradually acclimate it to the cooler temperatures outside. Just before planting, remove the straw or mulch from the planting hole. Place the tree in the hole, making sure the roots at the top of the root ball are even with the soil line. Backfill the hole with reserved soil, water it well, and spread 2 or 3 inches of mulch over the planting site to hold moisture and minimize temperature fluctuations.

Using a live evergreen as your Christmas tree does take a little more work and planning. However, if you follow the steps above, it can provide a Christmas present to your family for years to come.